

Ansley Wilcox House  
(Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural  
National Historic Site)  
641 Delaware Avenue  
Buffalo  
Erie County  
New York

HABS No. NY-5610

HABS  
NY  
15-BUF  
12-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

ANSLEY WILCOX HOUSE  
(THEODORE ROOSEVELT INAUGURAL  
NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE)

HABS  
NY,  
15-BUF,  
12-

Location: 641 Delaware Avenue, Buffalo, Erie County, New York

Present Owner: United States Government

Present Occupants: The historic site is operated by the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society and the Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural Site Foundation, Inc., on behalf of the National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior.

Present Use: National Historic Site and house museum. The house was opened to the public on September 14, 1971. Private organizations compatible with the historic site purpose lease the rear and upper portions of the house.

Statement of Significance: The Ansley Wilcox House was originally part of an Army post--Poinsett Barracks--which was established in 1838. After 1883, the interior was remodeled and an earlier frame addition was rebuilt. On September 14, 1901, in the library of the Ansley Wilcox House, Vice-President Theodore Roosevelt took the Oath of Office of the President of the United States. The house was declared a National Historic Site in 1966.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1838. The Poinsett Barracks were dedicated by President Martin Van Buren in 1839.
2. Architect: Poinsett Barracks, the Ansley Wilcox House, was designed and constructed by the United States Army Engineers under the direction of General Winfield Scott.
3. Original and subsequent owners:  
  
1838 Land purchased by Ebenezer Walden, June 5, 1837, for \$47,500, was leased to the U. S. Government for the establishment of a military post to be used for the defense of the Niagara Frontier. The Poinsett Barracks or Buffalo Barracks were built in 1838. The lease was terminated by the

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government in 1845, following a move to Fort Porter.

- 1847 September 22, 1847, E. Walden sold a portion of "Walden Hill" to Joseph G. Masten, Mayor of Buffalo and Judge of the Superior Court. This portion included the Ansley Wilcox House. Cost: \$3,500. Buffalo Land Records, Deeds, Book 122, p. 625.
- 1857 June 23, 1857. Joseph G. Masten sold the property to Oliver Lee and Company, Bank of Buffalo for \$32,500.
- 1859 April 4, 1859. Oliver Lee Bank was sold at public auction and went into receivership. As a result of the receiver's sale, Gilbert L. Wilson, treasurer of the New York Central Railroad Company, a large depositor of the Oliver Lee Bank, purchased the property on April 9, for \$26,598.37.
- 1863 May 1, 1863. The New York Central Railroad sold the property to Albert P. Laning, New York State Assemblyman and State Senator. Buffalo Land Records, Deeds, Book 259, p. 238.
- 1881 The widow and daughter of Albert P. Laning sold the property to Frederick Bell, a wealthy businessman from Rochester, for \$37,581.
- 1883 November 17, 1883. Frederick Bell sold the property to Alfred Bell, a lumberman from Rochester. The relationship between the two Bells has not been determined. After holding the land for ten days, Bell sold the property to Dexter P. Rumsey, the owner of large parcels of real estate in north Buffalo and on Grand Island. Buffalo Land Records, Deeds, Book 463, p. 62. During this same year, Rumsey gave the house to his daughter, Mrs. Ansley Wilcox, for her lifetime use. Upon her death in 1933, the house reverted to the Rumsey estate.
- 1938 Oliver and Kathryn Lawrence moved into the house as tenants of the Rumsey estate.
- 1939 The house was opened as the Kathryn Lawrence Tea Room. When a liquor license was obtained, the name was changed to the Kathryn Lawrence Restaurant.
- 1947 October 1, 1947. Oliver and Kathryn Lawrence purchased the property from the Rumsey estate for \$62,000.

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- 1957 April 23, 1957. The Lawrences transferred this holding to a corporation, 641 Delaware Avenue. Lawrence was president of the domestic corporation.
- 1959 Liberty National Bank leased a portion of the property on which the branch bank now stands.
- 1960 Three thirty-three-year leases were given to Nathan Benderson, president of Benderson Development Corporation. The agreement at \$1,500 per month, allowed the leaser the right to demolish the house at will with consent of the owner. Benderson intended to raze the house in order to build a parking lot.
- 1963 As a result of Benderson's announcement that he would raze the Wilcox House unless it was proclaimed a National Historic Site within thirty days, the ninety-nine year lease was returned to Oliver Lawrence for \$15,000. On November 22, 1963, the Liberty National Bank Corporation purchased the property for \$150,000.
- 1969 May 23, 1969. The United States Government purchased the property for \$250,000.
4. Builder or contractor, suppliers: Unknown.
5. Original plans: None known. A complete set, nine sheets, of the c. 1890 alteration plans by George Cary are contained in the Cary Manuscript Collection, Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society. Five sheets of plans by Robert A. Hill showing proposed alterations and existing conditions, c. 1938, are contained in the Historic Structures Report, Part II, November, 1969. Also contained within this report are seven sheets of plans by Shelgren, Patterson and Marzec showing proposed restoration and rehabilitation based on existing conditions, March 15, 1969.
6. Alterations and additions: There is no information on any alterations prior to 1863. Albert P. Laning, owner at this time, engaged Thomas Tilden, a Buffalo carpenter, to remodel the house. Until Laning's ownership the two-story portico is reputed to have been on the east end of the building, facing the original parade grounds of the Barracks. Tilden is supposed to have moved this portico to the west (Delaware Avenue) side, cut in the center doorway, built a basement and a one-and-a-half or two-

story service wing on the east end, and put a full basement under the main portion of the house. Undoubtedly the principal first-floor rooms were re-trimmed according to the current fashion. During the ownership of Ansley Wilcox, the first alteration on record was the installation of a bay window in the first floor on the south side of the main portion of the building. This was designed in 1892, by George Cary, Buffalo architect. The original design of the bay window shows a leaded glass, semi-domed roof to the bay. The bottom portion is today as shown in the original drawing. Shortly after this rather minor alteration, Wilcox embarked on a much more ambitious building program with Cary as architect. He tripled the size of the original building by demolishing the Laning service wing and adding approximately sixty feet of building to the east, containing a basement, two floors, and an attic. The original old part of the house was left without changes except for the insertion of new ornamental glass panels in the Delaware Avenue entrance. This work was completed by the latter part of the 1890s. Several other changes were made by Wilcox during his ownership. After 1938, alterations were made to the interior to make the house more suitable as a restaurant. Interior partitions were removed from the first and second floors of the oldest portion of the house. New openings were cut between the other principal rooms on the first floor. The carriage house north of the residence was demolished, but a portion of the wall parallel with the residence was incorporated in a small, two-story addition built at the northeast corner. Robert A. Hill was the architect. The wooden doors and transom of the Delaware Avenue entrance were removed in the late 1940s or early 1950s.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

The Poinsett Barracks were constructed immediately following the outbreak of the Patriot's War in 1837, as part of a defense against possible combat with the British Canadians. Poinsett Barracks was named for the Secretary of War under Martin Van Buren, Joel Roberts Poinsett. Poinsett was also Ambassador to Mexico and named the poinsettia plant. In addition to General Winfield Scott, many other famous officers of the Civil War and Mexican-American War served at Poinsett Barracks. Dr. Robert Cooke Wood, son-in-law of Zachary Taylor, became Assistant Surgeon General of the Federal Army. Capt. Samuel Heintzelman was promoted to the rank of Major General during the Civil War and served

as chief advisor to Lincoln. Henry J. Hunt was a commander of the Union Artillery at the Battle of Gettysburg. John C. Pemberton, a personal friend of U. S. Grant, joined the Confederate Army. Although he surrendered to Grant at Vicksburg, he received lenient surrender terms. A native of Buffalo, William G. Williamson, topographical engineer, was killed during the Mexican War. The citizens of Buffalo raised money to have his body sent back to Buffalo to be buried in Section A, Forest Lawn Cemetery. John Taylor Wood, son of Dr. Robert Wood, joined the Confederate Army under his uncle Jefferson Davis. Wood's men sank thirty commercial ships in New England, captured two Union gunboats, and sank all the Union ships in Chesapeake Bay. Ansley Wilcox, resident of the house from 1883 until his death in 1930, was a nationally prominent lawyer. From 1883-85, Wilcox was counsel for the commission appointed by Gov. Grover Cleveland to acquire land for the New York State Reservation at Niagara Falls. Wilcox was a member of the Reservation Commission from 1910 to 1917. With his involvement in the case of Rogers versus the City of Buffalo, Wilcox established the constitutionality of the Civil Service Law. In the case of Briggs versus Spaulding, which he took to the Supreme Court, Wilcox established the liability for negligence of directors of national banks. Wilcox is credited with developing the idea of holding city and county elections in odd-numbered years, and state elections in even-numbered years. This proposal, aimed at freeing municipal governments from politics, was adopted at the New York State Constitutional Convention of 1894. Wilcox himself thought this his greatest single achievement. As professor of Medical Jurisprudence at the University of Buffalo, 1885-1906, Wilcox became known for his speciality. In 1913-14, he was one of the commissioners to examine public health laws of New York State. As a close personal friend of Grover Cleveland, Wilcox was one of the original "Mugwumps" who refused to support the Republican Presidential candidacy of James G. Blaine. Wilcox was most active in many national and Buffalo civic organizations including the Buffalo Charity Organization Society, Buffalo Civil Service Reform Association, and the National Municipal League. He was also a socially prominent member of the Buffalo Athletic Club, the Saturn Club, and other Buffalo and New York City social and golf clubs.

Famous visitors to the Poinsett Barracks and Wilcox residence included Martin Van Buren, Zachary Taylor, Jefferson Davis, John Quincy Adams, John Tyler, Millard Fillmore, Abraham Lincoln, U. S. Grant, Grover Cleveland, William McKinley, William H. Taft, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

As the Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural National Historic Site, the Ansley Wilcox House is nationally important as the site of the Inauguration of the twenty-sixth President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt. President William McKinley had been assassinated while addressing the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo. The Oath of Office was administered to Roosevelt, standing in front of the bay window, by Judge John R. Hazel of the United States District Court, 3:32 p.m., September 14, 1901.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: A steel engraving of a bird's-eye view of Delaware Avenue shows the house and siting. Picturesque America, 1873. A collection of interior and exterior photographs based on those found in the Iconographic Collection of the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society was assembled as a source for restoration documentation in 1969. Most photographs date from the period of ownership of the Wilcox family, 1883 to 1938.
2. Bibliography:
  - a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Buffalo Land Records, Deeds, City Clerk's Office.

Cary Manuscript Collection, Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society.

Lyons, Margaret M., and Sandore, Debra L. "The Wilcox Mansion." Unpublished manuscript prepared for the Junior League of Buffalo, Inc., Wilcox Mansion Docent Committee, August 27, 1971.
  - b. Secondary and published sources:

Buffalo Courier Express. January 27, 1930, October 8, 1947, January 3, 1966.

Buffalo Evening News. September 15, 1901, October 29, 1964.

Buffalo Express. September 22, 1901.

Buffalo Times. December 11, 1927.

Shelgren, William O., and Dunn, Walter S., Jr. Ansley Wilcox House, N.H.S., Part II, Historic Structures

Report. Edited by Norman M. Souder. Washington, D. C.: Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation, U. S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1969.

3. Likely sources not yet investigated:

Poinsett Barracks, Old Military Branch and Cartographic Division, National Archives.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This Greek Revival structure, although one of the earlier residences on Delaware Avenue, "Millionaires' Row," is preserved today as an historical rather than an architectural landmark.
2. Condition of fabric: The structure as restored and renovated is in excellent condition.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The five-bay, two-and-one-half-story structure is rectangular in plan, approximately 43 feet by 115 feet, with several projections and bays.
2. Foundations: The earlier foundations are of ledge stone.
3. Wall construction: The brick walls are painted light olive with cream trim. Two-story fluted Corinthian pilasters are applied to the southern corners of the projecting bay of the morning room.
4. Structural system: The walls are load bearing. The interior wood framing system was reinforced with iron beams in the alterations of c. 1894.
5. Chimneys: There are nine brick chimneys.
6. Openings:
  - a. Doorways: The west center entrance contains a semi-circular top light and double-leaf wooden doors with arched, etched-glass lights. The original



transom or top light was filled with an etched-glass panel similar to the interior vestibule top light. The carriage entrance on the north has a single-leaf interior door with a leaded glass panel. Leaded glass fanlight and sidelights complete this composition. The glass-paneled double doors leading from the dining-room to the south terrace are set in a Colonial-Revival Palladian composition whose flanking engaged columns support a slightly projecting gabled pediment with fanlight. Two large nine-light windows topped by a slightly projecting architrave are framed by pilasters and the engaged columns. From the east wall of the morning room, a pair of French doors leads to the south terrace. The east elevation contained a centered, single-leaf, paneled wooden door which originally opened into the large kitchen area. A single-leaf, paneled wooden door located in the west wall of the 1938 addition provided access to the stairhall.

- b. Windows: The west facade has original six-over-six-light sashes. They are capped by rectangular headers, as are the other original first-story windows. The second-story windows of the 1838 portion are set flush to the molded cornice. These second-story windows have louvered wooden shutters painted green-black. The windows in the c. 1894 portion have brick jib headers. Centered in the west projecting gabled pediment is an original Palladian window. There is a semicircular window in the brick-ended pediment of the south projecting bay of the morning room. A cantilevered bay window in the south wall of the library has three double-hung windows. A narrow window located to the east of the library bay has a stained-glass top light. Other double-hung windows have six-over-six-light sashes.
- 7. Roof: The red, tin-covered, hipped roof is pierced by gabled dormers on the south side of the 1838 portion. Other dormers are located on the north side of the c. 1894 addition. The 1838 portion of the house has a deep molded wood entablature and cornice. The projecting bay of the morning room has a deep cornice extending further than that on the main block. Original drawings show a balustrade surrounding an observation platform which is centered in the roof of the

1838 portion. The Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation, National Park Service, U. S. Department of the Interior, recommended that this be replaced according to the original drawings.

8. Porches: The main facade is dominated by a deep, two-story, pedimented portico, supported by six smooth-shafted wooden columns with capitals derived from the Doric order. The columns are finished with a noticeable torus and mounted on wooden plinth blocks, which are set on the wooden porch floor. A straight run of four wooden steps leads from the sidewalk to the porch. This restored stairway has wooden balusters, a curved, molded handrail, and decorative cast-iron newel posts. The carriage or north entrance has a one-story projecting glassed-in porch with a flat roof and a projecting cornice above a deep entablature. The front corners are supported by two columns. An open, elevated, wood, slat-floored terrace, extended from the dining room. Wrought-iron railings were placed on two sides. Added as part of the c. 1894 alterations, this terrace was removed during renovation.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: The center entrance on the west facade opens into a small vestibule. The interior double doors, with etched glass panels, open into the stairhall. To the left is an exhibit room--formerly two reception rooms or parlors. To the right is the library. These two rooms comprise the original 1838 portion of the house. The stairhall crosses the north-south hall which originates at the north entrance and opens into the dining room to the east. A stairwell and hall to the north provide access to the second floor and a servants' hall, now rental space. The north entry hall terminates on the south in the morning room which is now used for visitor orientation. A kitchen, kitchen pantry, and butler's pantry were located in the eastern portion of the c. 1894 addition. These spaces have become available for rent. The 1938 wing on the north-east corner of the house contains a stairway and rooms. Access is provided through the old servants' dining hall. The second floor has a similar arrangement of rooms. However, all partitions were removed from the 1838 portion in 1938, for restaurant dining accommodations. These partitions have not been replaced as on the first floor. The third floor or attic originally

contained the servant quarters and storage areas. The small rooms opened from a center east-west hall. A basement is located under the 1838 portion and under the western portion of the c. 1894 addition.

2. Stairways: The original straight-run stairway in the 1838 center entrance hall was removed in 1938. The stairway was reconstructed in 1970 according to floor marks. The enclosed stairway located on the north wall of the c. 1894 addition extends from the basement to the third floor. This stairway provides access to the second-floor rental areas. The two-story 1938 north-east addition contains a stairway which can be reached either from the exterior or from the 1938 kitchen.
3. Flooring: In the 1838 portion, all floors are oak. In the exhibit area the flooring is dark stained, nine-inch, oak parquet squares, each consisting of four strips. All floors in the c. 1894 portion are oak. The first floor of the 1938 addition is concrete. All floors of the third floor are pine.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: All walls and ceilings are plaster. The library has been completely restored and furnished according to c. 1901 photographs. The walls are lined with oak bookcases following the original designs. The remaining wall areas and soffits are covered with a bordered paper in a representative pattern of the period manufactured by the Birge Wallpaper Company. Two ornamental plaster ceiling medallions have been reinstalled according to photographic documentation. Wallpaper of the period has also been used in the hall and morning room. The morning room, originally used by Mr. Wilcox as a study, was the site of Roosevelt's first official Cabinet meeting. From this room he issued the proclamation of President McKinley's death. This ceiling has elaborate plaster tracery of connecting circles, each framing a quatrefoil. A vertical paneled white wooden wainscot with a narrow top border of running quatrefoils remains on the south wall. The dining room ceiling has the original, c. 1894, plaster Adamesque ceiling ornament surrounded by modern fiberboard planks. The elaborate denticulated cornice and Corinthian corner pilasters are painted white. A similar cornice exists in the north entrance hall.
5. Doorways and doors: Heavy mahogany two-panel doors found in the basement have been reinstalled at the west end of the entrance hall. All wooden trim in the library,

the north entrance hall, the west entrance hall, and the northwest or exhibition room has been restored to match remainders of the original woodwork. All library woodwork is stained oak. All other woodwork is painted. The original remaining woodwork on the second floor indicates that the c. 1894 addition had trim which repeated that of the 1838 portion. Six-panel, Greek Revival doors are set in slightly molded, eared doorways.

6. Special decorative features: The library bookcases--restorations of the originals--have a narrow top edging of spindle work and paneled cupboard doors below. An elaborate arch of spindle work is centered above the case-lined east wall. The semicircular window seat with diaper-patterned upholstery and oak-paneled base has been restored. The fireplace, located to the west of the window seat on the south wall, has an elaborate mantelpiece with a projecting, slightly arched gallery of spindle work supported by narrow, turned, twisted, and reeded columns. The back is paneled. The slightly curved mantel is topped by a narrow gallery of spindles. The surround is surfaced with small, square, green glazed tiles, each with a rosette design. The original glazed-tile hearth has a brass gallery. The entire fireplace composition with the exception of the hearth is a reconstruction based on lath marks, points of fastening, and photographs. The Tudor Revival fireplace of the morning room has a projecting mantel, vertical side panels, and a running design of quatrefoils similar to the wainscot. However the wood has a dark stain. The molded, arched opening has a marbelized surround. The elegant fireplace composition of the dining room remains intact. The molded, paneled, scroll-bracketed overmantel is capped by a broken-scroll pediment. The composition is flanked by two engaged, fluted Corinthian columns which extend from elevated bases to the denticulated, compound cornice. Three Colonial Revival fireplaces remain on the second floor.
7. Hardware: None of note.
8. Lighting: The original matched pair of brass gas fixtures, each with four etched glass shades, have been reinstalled in the library.
9. Heating: The house, c. 1894, was heated by a combination of fireplaces and a hot-air gravity furnace. A new forced-hot-air heating system with concealed supply ducts has been installed.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The house is set back and elevated from the east side of Delaware Avenue. Although this section of Delaware Avenue is now totally commercial, the Ansley Wilcox House was originally one of many large residences which lined this street. (See HABS No. NY-5613.)
2. Historic landscape design: None.
3. Outbuildings: None.
4. Walks: A long, stepped sidewalk leads from the street to the center west entrance.

Prepared by Susan R. Slade  
September 1973

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This photo-data book was prepared as part of a 1964-65 recording project in co-operation with the Buffalo-Western New York Chapter of AIA, Olaf William Shelgren (at that time Chairman of the Chapter's Preservation Committee), and Olaf William Shelgren, Jr.--both, of the firm Shelgren, Patterson and Marzec. Photographs were taken in May, 1965, by Jack E. Boucher, HABS staff photographer. Under the direction of John C. Poppeliers, Chief, HABS, a further research and editorial project was undertaken in September, 1973, by Susan R. Slade, architectural historian.